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Learning from Workplace Development Initiatives: External Evaluations versus Internal Understandings

Bjørn Gustavsen

In efforts to promote new forms of work organization, the use of exemplary cases and the notion of best practices have played a key role. There are, however, major problems associated with diffusing experience from such sources to new workplaces. To reach out in working life and attain scope in the changes, there is a need for other strategies. To explore options and potentials in this context, workplace development programs have been launched in several countries. The purpose of this article is to look at some of the programs that have emerged in the Scandinavian context, with a view to seeing how the issue of scope has been approached and what can be learnt from the programs. In association with the learning issue, the evaluations done of the programs will be the point of departure. The article will, consequently, highlight questions associated with evaluations: Are they read? What discourses, if any, do they enter? Are they acted upon?

Key words: programs, learning, networks, distributive strategies, regionalisation

Introduction

Change and development in working life can be initiated from many quarters; in most cases the initiative comes from local management and is carried through in processes based on some degree of involvement from the

employees concerned. In a number of countries, in particular in Western Europe, there have, however, emerged initiatives beyond this, in the form of what can be called programs. In most cases a program aims at making enterprise level actors initiate change and offers support to the processes that emerge if the local parties decide to make real the intentions of the program. Beyond this, programs can be of many different kinds.

When systematic efforts to change work organization first appeared in program form – the first known case is the Industrial Democracy Program to appear in Norway in the 1960s (Emery/Thorsrud 1976) – the main idea was to create “models” that could function as examples for working life in general. The examples demanded a substantial investment in the workplaces that were to play this role; in the early phase taking the form of experiments along the lines suggested by Kurt Lewin. When the lighthouse cases were to form the nuclei in broader processes of diffusion, problems did, however, emerge. These are well known and much discussed and often rotate around the difficulties associated with lifting ideas out of one context and implementing them in another. While different workplaces may have characteristics in common, there will generally also be numerous aspects that differ, and in any process of diffusion these differences need to be considered. Furthermore, workplaces do not only differ in terms of production systems and associated work relationships, they also differ in terms of broader social characteristics, such as the degree of trust between management and employees, the extent to which they belong to unions and employer associations, and much more.

As efforts to create processes of diffusion accumulated, the emphasis on differences and associated complexities increased. The idea that a few lighthouse cases could be used to achieve broad change in working life was successively abandoned, in favour of more complex views. This was the context where many of the workplace development programs saw daylight: They were often intended to identify model characteristics, or best practices, but they were also generally built on the recognition that there was no direct way from best practices to broad change. To achieve scope in change, there was a need to consider complexities and differences, and most programs had as a main intention to find creative ways in which to do this. When looking at what has come out of the various programs it is necessary to keep this dual

purpose in mind. While many observers tend to identify programs on the basis of what best practices they argue, the generally most important problem for most programs has been the issue of how to reach out in scope.

Learning from programs is the main theme of this article. The discussion will be based on four initiatives that can be said to answer to the notion of program: First, the joint workplace development initiatives of the labour market parties in Norway in the period 1983 to 1990; second, the LOM program in Sweden (1985 – 1990), one of several efforts to promote the workplace development agreement between the labour market parties in Sweden, financed and organized by the Work Environment Fund; third, the Enterprise Development 2000 program in Norway (1994 – 2000), financed and organized by the Research Council of Norway and launched to support the workplace development agreement between the labour market parties in Norway and, fourth, the Value Creation 2010 program in Norway (2000 – 2007), a sequel to the Enterprise Development 2000 program, but with a stronger regional dimension. All these efforts were made subject to evaluations and the evaluations will be the point of departure for the discussion. Using several programs and evaluations, it is possible to compare not only the programs but also the evaluations: are there differences, in what do they consist and what significance did they have? These programs form, furthermore, a sequence in the sense that they build on each other. New programs were designed on the basis of experiences from previous ones, the evaluations included. This makes it possible to evaluate the evaluations: What role did they play when new initiatives were taken?

The agreements on development and the initial positioning of research

Both in Sweden and Norway research had, in the later 1960s and early 1970s, been involved in action research programs in working life. In the 1970s these initiatives successively died out and there was a call for a new start. In 1982 the Swedish as well as the Norwegian labour market parties made agreements on development. Against the background of the 1960s and 70s, when work and workplace relationships were subject to much debate and initiatives from different groups of actors, nation state politicians included, the agreements

must be seen as a move from the labour market parties towards gaining more control of workplace development processes. The agreements reflected, furthermore, the recognition that scope was becoming the critical issue rather than establishment of criteria and exemplary cases. With scope as the major dimension, the labour market parties, as broad membership organizations, saw themselves as being in a central position.

The purpose of the agreements was first and foremost to mobilise the workplace actors to focus more strongly on work and workplace relationships and become more creative in developing new solutions within this area. They did not, however, lay down specific criteria for what should be considered the good work organization.

Although the agreements were fairly parallel, the strategies chosen for implementation were different. During the 1970s there had been a strong increase in the focus on workplace issues in Sweden and a Fund under tripartite steering – the Work Environment Fund – had been established as a core actor on policy level (Oscarsson 1997). With a budget growing from about 25 mill. SEK in 1972, to about 800 million in the early 1990s (according to today's exchange rate, about SEK 9 equals one Euro), the Fund launched a series of programs to promote labour – management co-operation as a main driver in workplace development. The programs unfolded under different headings. The first one was dedicated to the issue of work organization and work environment, the second to leadership, organization and co-determination, the third to competence, and so on. Altogether about 10 programs were launched, roughly expressing the same pattern: The running time was five years and the main purpose of each program was to inquire into specific aspects of work roles and work relationships and explore new ways of shaping these aspects. While each program was dedicated to a set of specific issues, the sum total of programs was supposed to, over time, cover working life as a whole and confront all major issues and diffusion problems.

Although with some differences between the programs, they were generally built on the assumption that the enterprise level actors themselves had the competence called for to carry through the changes. External resources were intended to function as trigger mechanisms, to some extent as support, as rapporteur and as evaluator. Research was only one of several types of

actors seen relevant in this kind of context and research was largely intended to cover the two last functions. In actual practice the situation often became more complex: Research was supposed to perform its tasks in close co-operation with the actors concerned and was, consequently, sometimes brought into situations where two-way communication with those concerned became a necessity and where research could not avoid exerting some degree of influence on what happened in practice. Although the use of research was fairly conventional, the element of active participation in the workplace development processes was sufficiently strong to warrant a more outright investment in an action research program. The second of the initiatives of the Work Environment Fund (LOM; short for the Swedish concepts for leadership, organization and co-determination) was to be this program.

Lacking substantial means to support the process, the efforts of the agreement on development in Norway became much more modest. The labour market parties concentrated on offering some measures that could promote relevant local activities. In particular three measures were identified; project support, conferences and project fellowships (for a closer discussion of these measures see Gustavsen 1993). The conferences – initially called mapping conferences, later renamed into dialogue conferences – appeared as the main kind of effort: The conferences were intended to bring the local parties in each enterprise together and in a new kind of setting where emphasis was on joint agenda setting, open discussions, equal rights, rotation of tasks and similar. With approximately 450 conferences being organized throughout the 1980s, the conferences turned out to be a popular kind of effort.

The role of research, in the Norwegian context, was to participate in the formation of the agreement and in the development of the measures, in particular the conferences. Research could participate in a limited number of conferences only, and had to develop design criteria that made it possible for the enterprise level actors to run the conferences themselves. Throughout the 1980s the conference concept and associated procedures were successively developed in terms of participation, process and functions (for presentations of the notion of dialogue conference see Gustavsen/Engelstad 1986; Gustavsen 2001).

When the LOM program was launched in Sweden, the emphasis on dialogue, communication and new discourse relationships between the enterprise actors developed in Norway was adopted. The resources of the Work Environment Fund made it possible to take this kind of strategy several steps further, through pursuing the dialogue concept in terms of a program where research could become directly involved in development processes in a substantial number of workplaces. In linking research to workplaces, the idea of geographically distributed nodes was applied (Gustavsen 2006). The participants were, as a point of departure, organized in small networks of four organizations and to each such network research resources were attached. With more than 60 researchers participating in the program, distributed on about 15 different research institutions, it became possible to support a number of network formations all over the country. In this way the first steps were taken towards transforming the challenge of diffusion from making impulses from a few organizations bear on many, to one of creating parallel processes where each process could grow through recruiting new participants.

While the LOM program was made subject to a substantial evaluation, the research efforts associated with the workplace development agreement in Norway were too limited to count as a program, and were not evaluated as such. Around 1990 there appeared, however, two sets of events that could, both, be said to throw some light on the issue of evaluation.

Evaluations

When the agreements between the Norwegian Confederation of Business and Industry and the Confederation of Trade Unions were up for renegotiation in 1990, both parties expressed satisfaction with how the agreement had functioned so far. With about 450 conferences and maybe as much as 5 to 600 enterprises having been in contact with the agreement, they saw it as meeting a real need among the membership. The point that less than 10% of the users had moved beyond, say, a conference to perform more thorough going change was not interpreted to indicate that the agreement was on the wrong track, but that the agreement needed to be strengthened in terms of measures and resources. Along with the revision of the agreement, the labour market

parties decided to place more emphasis on co-operation between enterprises in the form of networks and industry programs and they also decided to support investment in more research resources. It took several years before an increase in research resources could be made real, but the intention was clearly expressed, and had to be interpreted as expressing a positive view on the contributions of research.

The main characteristic of the LOM evaluation (Naschold 1993) was an emphasis on international comparison. As a point of departure, the evaluation identified the dialogue-oriented approach of the LOM program and saw this as different from the approaches generally preferred by US, German or Japanese firms. While all three, like Sweden, make efforts to promote participation, participation is often developed within frameworks that place rather strong restrictions on the scope and content of the participation. In US enterprises, participation is as a rule orchestrated by management in each separate enterprise. In Germany participation has more of an independent platform, but is generally supposed to take place in such a way that objectively defined, technologically oriented design ideas are promoted. The Japanese pattern, emerging from the idea of taking ordinary production workers out of their jobs and let them perform quality circle and similar work for periods of time, was found to be closer to the Swedish model but still in important respects different. The belief in objectively given design criteria was seen to be stronger, as well as the emphasis on business-based co-operation between enterprises. While the LOM approach, with its emphasis on the mechanisms that generate organization, rather than on what kind of organization to apply, gives more freedom to the actors concerned – not least the workers – the committee also saw this kind of approach as too strongly based on specific Scandinavian traditions and a corresponding neglect of the harsh realities of international competition.

The German evaluators did not, however, on this background, argue a reversal of the LOM strategy. Rather, the point was seen as making it more internationally competitive by using more resources to promote dialogue-oriented, open-ended processes in the workplaces. This point leads up to a main issue as this evaluation is concerned: The evaluation did not single out programs of comparable size and budget, but chose to look at the overall

development of large industrial cultures. Obviously, a small program in a small country could not compete directly with, say, the sum total of the acts of Japanese industry and in this respect the comparison became somewhat skewed. To this could also be added that with less ambitious criteria the practical results of the program improved substantially. Out of the 72 enterprises that actually developed a project within the framework of the program, 62 achieved improved employee participation, which was actually the main goal of the program. If the time horizon was lengthened, results also improved. A study made a few years later indicated more changes in more enterprises but largely enterprises that had joined forces with each other through the formation of networks (Engelstad/Gustavsen 1993).

At approximately the same time, the Ministry of Labour – to which the Work Research Institute belonged at the time – asked the Research Council of Norway to perform an evaluation of the institute. A committee of three researchers – two Americans and one Danish-American – came up with a strongly critical report, where action research was the main target of critique, on the argument that it did not meet relevant standards of science (Norges Forskningsråd 1991). The Ministry was advised to close the institute and redirect the money into work environment surveys.

There emerged no debate – public or other – where these different views were contrasted to each other. In fact, there did not even appear debates linked to each separate evaluation. The closest one came to a debate was the process surrounding the revision of the Norwegian agreement on workplace development. This process took place in a conference hotel over a period of three days and involved about 15 participants from each of the parties. When the LOM evaluation was presented in Stockholm, almost nobody from the Work Environment Fund, the labour market parties, the ministries concerned, or industry itself, showed up and no further discussions were arranged. The evaluation of the Work Research Institute was placed on the shelf, the reason being that it was found to be beside the point: The institute in case belongs to the so-called institute sector, which was originally established to perform applied research and in other ways create links to practical processes. Beyond the proposal to invest more in work environment surveys – a kind of effort of which there existed numerous from before, very few with any practical

impact – the evaluation contained no suggestions for alternative strategies. The Research Council saw the challenge as developing notions of science consistent with the demands of development processes, not as a withdrawal to a pure descriptive-analytic role.

Neither the LOM- nor the Work Research Institute evaluations had any direct impact on later events. There was no follow-up on the LOM program. Some years later a program built on the same ideas appeared in the health services but for reasons other than a wish to deepen the experiences from the LOM program. The LOM program came to be the only major effort at promoting action research in working life in Sweden during the period after 1980. Projects in individual enterprises and networks have appeared later and a more general turn has occurred in Swedish work research, towards what is, however, called interactive research rather than action research (see special issue of *International Journal of Action Research*, 3(3) in 2007). Interactive research is conventional in the sense that it is largely descriptive but it focuses on practical problems and takes place in close contact with the actors concerned and in such a way that practices are often influenced. There is an element of the LOM strategy in this, but the notion of interactive research is also influenced by the kind of role assigned to research in most of the Work Environment Fund programs, where research was used for the purpose of performing inquiries into specific areas, but in close contact with those concerned.

The Work Research Institute was not closed, nor were investments in questionnaire studies of working life increased; if anything, the belief in such studies has continued to decline. Instead, an initiative strongly influenced by the LOM program emerged, out of a combination of the intentions of the labour market parties to strengthen their approach to local development and the need of the Research Council to further explore strategies where practical impact and research procedures could be combined. Even the LOM evaluation played a role in the Norwegian context. While few read the evaluation its existence was known and it was known that even though the evaluation pointed at major shortcomings in the LOM program, as well as in workplace development strategies in Scandinavia in general, the ideas behind the pro-

gram were evaluated as promising and it was also recognized that the program had been able to achieve significant results in some cases.

Enterprise development 2000

In Norway, the co-operation with research did not get going in a more substantial sense until 1994 when Enterprise Development 2000 (ED 2000) was launched in the form of a co-operation between the labour market parties, the Research Council of Norway and Innovation Norway. In the year 2000 this program was replaced by “Value Creation 2010” which was, in turn, replaced by a program called “Measures for regional R&D and innovation” in 2007.

ED 2000 built to a large extent on the LOM strategy and the idea of promoting the notion of democratic dialogue through linking research to a number of geographically distributed networks of enterprises. On the basis of experience from the LOM program, where many of these combinations had been fragile and unstable, much more consideration was, in ED 2000, paid to the link-up between research and enterprises. The local representatives of the labour market parties were also assigned a more active role.

ED 2000 was, from the beginning, equipped with an international benchmarking group (with members from Sweden, Germany, Finland, France and the UK). The task of the benchmarking group was to keep track of the program and provide a basis for evaluation for the program owners and program board. The evaluation team was, in other words, assigned to the program from the start rather than brought in at the end. When the program was drawing towards a close, the benchmarking group organised an evaluation. What did this focus on and what was its significance for the next program phase?

Compared to the LOM evaluation the differences are striking. While, in the LOM evaluation, global challenges and trends constituted the background against which the more specific activities of the program were held up, the ED 2000 evaluation went directly to fairly concrete but also limited issues like how the program was received by enterprise level actors, what kind of projects emerged, what actors were involved in the projects, how satisfied they were with the results, and similar (Bakke 2001). Generally, the core

theme of the evaluation was the degree to which the program had penetrated the enterprises and become anchored in management and the local union. Although some shortcomings were pointed out, the evaluation left no doubt that such penetration had actually taken place in about 40 to 50 enterprises and that the program was worth following up. This led to a new program, called Value Creation 2010, with a somewhat larger budget and a ten year running time.

Avoiding a broad discourse on general issues, the evaluation did not fall victim to the problem of the LOM evaluation: lack of a definable audience. On the other hand, in speaking to those directly involved in the program, it did not contribute to the development of a broader interest in workplace development issues.

Value Creation 2010

Although building on ED 2000, Value Creation 2010 (VC 2010) also came to represent a new approach in certain respects. Central in this context was the regional dimension. Around 2000, several steps were taken by national political bodies to promote a regionalisation of processes pertaining to economic development. Of significance to VC 2010 were, in particular, two aspects of this process: First, the establishment of regional partnerships as specific bodies responsible for regional development plans. Generally consisting of a representative of the regional authorities, a regional representative of Innovation Norway (a state agency for the promotion of innovation), one representative from each of the regional offices of the labour market parties and often even representatives of the regional institutions for research and higher education, the partnerships were – and are – intended to promote a consensus-based governance function as economic development is concerned. There is one such partnership in each of the 19 administrative regions into which Norway is divided. Second, in connection with the drive towards regionalisation, more attention was to be paid to the region as the arena for the formation of such phenomena as enterprise networks and clusters. The underlying idea was that networks and clusters demand relationships of co-

operation and trust between the actors concerned and that relationships with these qualities are often anchored in local-regional environments.

VC 2010 was designed to reflect these aspects. The efforts should, as far as possible, be linked to the regional development plans and the support to network formations should put emphasis on local relationships as the platforms for the formation of clusters and networks of enterprises.

As the name indicates, VC 2010 was intended to run until the year 2010. It was, however, transformed into a new program as early as 2007. This had to do with the growing pressure towards making more of the efforts of the Research Council more explicitly regional. VC 2010 was, consequently, not made subject to any final evaluation. There was, however, a mid-term evaluation. This was, according to the standard procedures of the Research Council, made subject to a bid in open competition and a UK-based research and consultancy firm by the name of Technopolis, which had previously done an evaluation of the Research Council of Norway, was chosen. On what did this evaluation focus and what was its impact?

After a fairly sketchy presentation and discussion of the activities of the program, the evaluation focussed on two points of criticism (Arnold et al. 2005):

The first point was that the program, due to its dependence on the co-operation between The Confederation of Norwegian Business and Industry and the Confederation of Trade Unions, was largely limited to “traditional industry. The evaluators argued strongly for the need to reach broader segments of working life. To achieve this they argued that the program should be broken loose from these specific parties and turned into a general public service program. The program would then be better able to reach actors belonging to other labour market organizations – of which there are several – as well as the unorganized.

The second main critical perspective pertained to the partnership dimension. While ED 2000, at least as a broad principle, had focused on enterprises and enterprise networks, the main new dimension in VC 2010 was the regional partnerships. The researchers participating in the program were not only supposed to help bring projects correspond to the goals and activities of the regional development plans, they were also supposed to help promote the

formation and work processes of the partnerships. The evaluators saw this orientation towards the partnerships as expanding the program too much. When added to the existing tasks associated with the development of workplaces and enterprise networks, partnership directed activities went beyond what the program resources made realistic. The evaluators proposed that the efforts of the program were limited to the levels that had been in focus in ED 2000: the workplace and the network.

No effort was made to compare VC 2010 to related efforts like the other programs discussed above, the ongoing work organization program in Finland (Alasoini 2006; Arnkil 2008) or the national campaigns to change work organization run in Sweden and Denmark in the 1990s (Gustavsen 2007). Nor were programs in other European countries – such as in Germany (Fricke 2000) and France (Pelletier 2007) – discussed and no attention was paid to broader issues of labour management co-operation in general.

Excepting one short conference, organised by the VC 2010 program, for the presentation of the evaluation report, no further discussion occurred, be it in the Research Council, among the labour market parties or other actors. The concrete events unfolding after the evaluation went in almost the opposite direction of the evaluation proposals. To start with the partnership issue, this was, by the Research Council, made into a core dimension of the new program. In evaluating applications for this program the Research Council has gone so far as to actually say that unless the efforts of research are part of an overall regional development plan created by a credible partnership, even high quality research contributions will not be supported. This forces research into a context where the partnerships become the keys to continued support and make the partnerships objects of influence in whatever way research is able to exercise influence.

The idea of breaking out of the confines constituted by traditional industry as the core joint area of the Confederation of Business and Industry and the Confederation of Trade Unions has fared somewhat better, although in a different way than suggested by the evaluators. What is actually happening is not that the links between the program and the traditional labour market parties are severed, but that initiatives are taken to diffuse the kind of co-operation existing between these parties to other actors in working life. The

new program presupposes that the regional partnerships can span across different segments of working life and bring together actors organized in the Confederation of Business and Industry and the Confederation of Trade Unions with members of other organizations, such as the confederations of public employers or the confederations of unions organizing people in white collar and/or academic work. Even actors who are not members of any union or employer organization are supposed to participate.

Another major event is the establishment of a joint committee, not unlike the board of the agreement on development, between the Confederation of Trade Unions on the one hand and the Confederation of Employers in Trade and Service on the other. What is happening is a successive expansion of the notion of co-operation as originally developed between the Confederation of Business and Industry and the Confederation of Trade Unions, into new fields. In this, numerous problems will appear and many have appeared already. What is clear, however, is that the expansion into new areas of working life will not take place through pulling the issue of workplace co-operation out of the hands of the Confederation of Business and Industry and the corresponding Confederation of Trade Unions, but by moving stepwise from the traditional parties to new groups of actors.

Global issues versus workplace operationals

Common to the LOM evaluation and the VC 2010 evaluation is that they both applied “a grand perspective”, in the sense that they related the efforts of the program to what can be called large issues: The LOM evaluation to the issue of work roles and work relationships within the framework of global competition, the VC 2010 evaluation to the issue of labour market organization and co-operation. The evaluations had, furthermore, major critical points to make in this context: The LOM evaluation that workplace co-operation in Scandinavia was too much of an inward directed process, with too strong links to historical and internal challenges within these countries, and a corresponding neglect of evolving international challenges, such as the Japanese productivity strategies and lean production. The VC 2010 evaluation made the point that the most advanced forms of co-operation and corresponding

development occurred within an area that was too narrow and needed to be radically expanded for co-operation to be a main driver in the working life of the future.

Contrary to this, the ED 2000 evaluation focussed on what may look like more trivial issues, in particular how and in what way the projects had penetrated the enterprises, what involvement could be seen from local management and union leadership, what the projects were about and why enterprises formed networks with each other. The evaluation talked to those actors among the labour market parties who were directly involved in the program and its steering functions and contributed to the investment in VC 2010. On the other hand; this focus implied that no consideration was given to the broader issues surrounding the program and to how to equip the new program cycle with the resources needed to embark on discourses on such themes as those that were taken up by the VC 2010 mid-term evaluation.

“The Scandinavian model”

The Nordic, or Scandinavian, countries are thought to pay more consideration to the issue of work organization than is generally the case, at least in Europe. On the European work organization surveys organised by the European Foundation for the improvement of Living and Working Conditions (i.e. 2007) the Scandinavian countries appear with the highest scores on worker autonomy. This is often interpreted in terms of society level characteristics, in particular the social democratic, or mixed economy, nature of the political system of these countries (i.e. Lorenz/Valeyre 2005). Through a high degree of organization in the labour market, and the development of a strong element of co-operation between the labour market parties, and between these parties, and the political authorities, a climate of co-operation and mutual trust has evolved over time. This climate is, in turn, thought to give rise to trust-based forms of work organization, with work roles characterised by autonomy at the core.

If we look at the long historical lines there is obviously an element of truth in this kind of explanation of “Scandinavian exceptionalism”. However, if patterns of work organization are promoted by a national “political cli-

mate”, this “climate” must find some kind of expression. A major element in this expression must be a discourse, or a national conversation, on work and organization. In such a conversation issues like the overall competitiveness of “the Scandinavian model” compared to models from other parts of the world, or the fate of “the Scandinavian model” in a working life where traditional industry is shrinking, would have to be core topics. This notwithstanding, the LOM evaluation as well as the VC 2010 evaluation, focussing on, respectively, the first and the second of these themes, met nothing but a massive silence.

There are, of course, different possible explanations. One can be that although the reports dealt with critical issues, the reports themselves lacked the legitimacy needed to make an impact on the national discourse. The LOM evaluation committee consisted of a professor of labour policy at the Science Centre in Berlin, a member of the managerial board of Daimler-Benz Holding AG and a head of section of the Metalworkers Union in Germany. This is probably the most high ranking and legitimate external group that has ever expressed views on work life issues in Scandinavia. The VC 2010 evaluation was headed by a researcher/consultant who had previously headed an evaluation of the Norwegian Research Council, an evaluation that attracted a lot of attention. It is also quite clear that both evaluations were geared to enter just such national discourses rather than the more limited groups of people responsible for the operative characteristics of the programs in each case. Since it is difficult to interpret the silence in terms of a lack of penetrative power of the evaluations as such, the most reasonable explanation is that there are no national discourses of the kind that could receive and incorporate these evaluations. There is, in other words, no “Scandinavian model” that has manifested itself in terms of a society level discourse on work and organization.

This notwithstanding, there are forces at work within this area, otherwise it is not likely that the Scandinavian countries would have scored as high on autonomy in work as they actually do. But what kind of forces?

Towards local-regional networks as the core learning unit

The period from the launching of the LOM program and until the present day covers 25 years. The programs discussed above have all occurred in a context

and this context has not been static. To some extent the programs have, themselves, influenced this context. In looking at the period as a whole, it is possible to identify a trend towards an increasing emphasis on the local-regional: In the early 1980s, there were still many actors who believed that working life could be changed through processes diffusing outwards from one centre. If we go further back, there was a belief in the ability of high profile exemplary cases to function as this centre. By the 1980s some modifications had occurred. The centre, as represented by, for instance, the Work Environment Fund in Sweden, was seen more as a bearer of a pedagogic role than as the generator of models or best practice cases. The complexity of reality had become more accepted and the need to adapt strategies to variable enterprise level contexts was better understood. The Work Environment Fund proceeded, however, in most programs from the notion of linking change processes to themes rather than to, say, local-regional groups of actors. The themes cut across working life and could, in many cases, bring widely dispersed actors together in one and the same effort.

The regional orientation of ED 2000 and VC 2010 emerged in a process of interaction with the environment and the successive recognition that the primary change agent in the field of work organization is what can loosely be referred to as “local networks”. By “local” is meant that they exist within a geographical area more narrow than the nation state. In most cases they have their point of departure in a few individuals who, for some reason or other, have become interested in the issue of work organization and have started to launch efforts within this area. In Scandinavia, these core groups generally consist of managers and union representatives, sometimes other actors as well, for instance researchers. From each core group a process of diffusion often takes place, in the form of a growing number of actors joining the group. Eventually, fairly broad networks and clusters of enterprises can emerge. Among the networks supported by the ED 2000/VC 2010 programs can be found, for instance, the Sunhordland industry network, encompassing about 20 enterprises spread over a substantial geographical area (Claussen 2003), the Grenland process industry network, originally encompassing a small number of chemical plants but having grown to become a network for regional development in an area encompassing about 100 000 people (Gus-

tavsen et al. 2008; Qvale 2008) and the Raufoss industry park with associated suppliers, encompassing about 60 enterprises on a concentrated territory (Johnstad 2007).

With a sufficient number of such networks, where the notion of autonomy in work is pursued, the national figures will be influenced. They may not be radically different from what they would otherwise have been, but sufficiently different to influence the location of a nation on a scale. This is also the picture emerging from the European work organization surveys; the Scandinavian countries have the highest scores on autonomy in work but the differences between these countries and other countries are gradual, not characterised by a major gap. The point is, consequently, not to look for what sets these countries apart from other countries in a more radical sense, but for what gives them an edge compared to other countries with which a number of characteristics are shared.

Learning within the field of work organization and workplace development, becomes a question of how the networks learn. It seems fairly clear that the basis for their learning is their own actions and the local, specific outcomes of these actions. Evaluations discussing general characteristics of national or other broad scenes may, of course, play a role in this kind of context, but only to the extent that they link to the local experiences. While the LOM evaluation contained a general discourse on Scandinavian versus Japanese productivity strategies, a network like Raufoss – where suppliers to the automobile industry constitute a major segment of the enterprises – has its own evaluation. In the Raufoss environment there is, for instance, a producer of wheel suspension systems in light metals that is, within its own segment, one of the most competitive in the world. Within this particular market segment a strategy for productivity and innovation based on employee participation is, in the Raufoss environment, considered superior to a strategy based on a more mechanical application of the kind of pre-given “best solution” often argued in the lean production literature. The Raufoss actors do, however, not argue that this is necessarily the case for actors in other contexts. The Raufoss actors are, furthermore, strongly preoccupied with how to make local co-operation function in terms of arenas and processes, an issue where general evaluations will seldom contain much of operational interest.

What, then, is needed to penetrate the local-regional networks? A characteristic of the known networks is that they put a lot of emphasis on trust. Knowledge and trust are strongly interwoven in the sense that the assessment and use of knowledge is strongly linked to the degree of trust placed in the source of the knowledge. There is no hard and fast line separating trusted actors from those not encompassed by the trust. It is, for instance, obviously not so that all actors outside the network are mistrusted. This, however, is not the point: The question is what demands are put on actors whose views are to play a role in the development of the network. Legitimacy within this area is largely assigned to actors who are network members on the operational level, for instance managers and union representatives within the enterprises who are members of the network. One reason why trust becomes of major importance is that knowledge of relevance to a network under development must generally pertain to what should be done to carry on and strengthen the development process. As pointed out by Shotter and Gustavsen (1999) this makes the relational-responsive aspects of the knowledge of critical importance: its ability to enter an ongoing stream of conversations and events.

In this there is an obvious dilemma facing research: Research will, in most cases, come from one or two research environments, in contexts where there are many other research environments that may have relevant views on what the network should do. How are we to ensure that the views penetrating each network are actually the most fruitful, the most updated, the most adequate to the task of developing the network? This is a question often emerging in relation to programs of the kind discussed above. Traditionally, the research community looks upon itself as a universal community, that is: a community where all that is said and written aims at all actors across the globe. The users should use the best possible knowledge, not the knowledge emanating from one single, “insider” group. However strong arguments can be mustered behind the idea of using “the best” from all the shelves filled by research, this is manifestly not what happens in practice. Only minimal fragments of all that is written on networks will, for instance, ever penetrate any specific network. Rather than departing from the assumption that a network of users can pick and choose from a global pool of knowledge, the point of departure

must be to make the research groups associated with each network as able to provide rich and differentiated impulses as possible.

Strategies for achieving this can be of different kinds: In all the programs discussed above, efforts have been and are made to make the participating researchers into a “research community” with as high a degree of internal communication and exchange as possible. Joint publications, a joint doctoral program and other steps are taken to expose the research groups to each other and to discuss and share ideas between them. By strengthening each research group, through making it part of a broader community, the potential for interacting with other groups, for instance internationally, is strengthened. Whatever is more specifically done, the point is to make the research group which actually is in contact with a specific network as able as possible to bring in a rich array of impulses. In this way, the development of research is made subject to the same logics as the diffusion of impulses between enterprises. First, a node of some interested and committed actors is established, then steps are taken to make the node into a growth point able to generate commitment from further actors until a broader network emerges. Such networks can, through regional and other mechanisms, be linked to other networks to constitute a broader social movement (Gustavsen 2003; Gustavsen et al. 2008).

There will be difficulties associated with making external evaluations of whole programs, done after the event, fit into and enrich this kind of pattern. These difficulties have been present throughout the whole period discussed above, but they have become increasingly visible over time. It is reason to assume that this is not only because of a more pronounced orientation towards the local-regional from the side of research, but also because there has been a real strengthening of local-regional development forces during the period. To acquire operational qualities evaluations need to be linked to each specific network and reflect the specific characteristics of each learning unit. Evaluations on program level can speak to people directly responsible for the program and deal with issues that these actors can have an operational relationship to. Given the continuously stronger emphasis on the local-regional processes, external program actors control, however, fewer and fewer of the parameters necessary to promote development. What, then, about “the Scan-

dinavian model” and its claim to be able to unite actors from the state to the workplace in one coherent whole?

The tripartite co-operation on work life issues originally characterising this model, can, in Norway, be said to have lasted up to about 1980. After this, there have been few initiatives appearing from the centre of society with the aim of promoting, say, learning oriented forms of work organization. The centre and the workplace have become too far removed from each other for the centre to be able to exert meaningful influence. The orientation towards co-operation created during earlier periods does, however, linger on but largely on the local level. In VC 2010 it was quite clear that the most advanced forms of labour-management co-operation occurred in old industrial centres, providing these centres with a dynamism that are, in most countries, found in less traditional environments. The point about the old industrial centres is that they are part of the history of the Scandinavian model: they have lived it and applied it over generations and they have actors who can carry on. In this way they are not dependent on central actors to keep the model alive. What, however, about the future?

The model cannot be kept up indefinitely through the ability of local-regional actors to remember history, interpret it with reference to the contemporary situation and act it out in practice. Sooner or later a society that seems to have forgotten this history will level out the traditions and memories. The future of the model is linked to the interest in- and the ability of, the emerging local-regional networks to base their development on this tradition and to develop it further. It is, however, linked to more than this. Being a tradition on the level of society rather than the region, somebody needs to give voice to the significance of co-operation and learning oriented forms of work organization on the general level. For this need to be filled, the networks must act together and see the upkeep and further development of the Scandinavian model as a joint task. Is this realistic?

It is possible to speculate at length on this issue and no simple answer is possible. There are, however, certain trends that can underpin an optimistic view. One aspect is a growth in the number and strength of the networks and their successive incorporation of other actors, such as representatives from regional administration and politics, research and education, and more. The

capacity of the networks to organize processes and present arguments is growing. In Sweden, traditionally a large enterprise society, it has become increasingly common to see economic development as linked to what is often called clusters, or technology blocks, of which 50 or so are generally identified. Denmark has for quite a while been known for its industrial districts; areas where enterprises from the same industry are located together within limited geographical areas. In Finland the regional may be less pronounced on the political level but there is a drift towards the local-regional conditioned by the need for learning on enterprise level (Alasoini 2006; Arnkil 2008). Finland seems, furthermore, to have maintained a higher degree of collaboration between the state and actors in working life. The chief reason for this is government policy within the field of innovation. Innovation is a “modern” theme that can provide a new platform for vertical integration in society.

The declining role of the state as organizer of discourses does not only pertain to the issue discussed above: work organization. It is a much more general trend and we can already see, within several areas, that broad discourses have to be promoted by other actors. The kind of formation often becoming relevant in this context can be called social movement (Gustavsen 2003). It is social movements that constitute the discursive spearhead in areas like democracy, humanism, equalisation between the sexes, ecology and climate, and more. State actors generally join the discourses and the nation states are of critical importance when it comes to action but they are not leading the processes of discourse that make it possible to identify challenges and point out ways in which to confront them. Work organization needs this kind of context and a clear link to the broader issue of democracy.

What is demonstrated by the presentation above is more than anything else that much has been done in the field and many experiences and arguments have been presented, be it by program actors or evaluators, but the experiences and views have had no audience beyond fairly narrow circles of directly involved actors. There is no coherent general discourse that can give meaning and force on the level of society to issues of work and organization. The individual organization is too narrow a framework, demonstrated by the point that all changes occurring on this level only, have belonged to specific

managerial regimes and disappeared with the disappearance of the regime. With the withdrawal of most nation states from the field, and the failure of the European Union to follow up on its own green paper on work organization (Commission of the European Communities 1997), local-regional actors are what remain.

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